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ABSTRACT

A program, in Rhode Island, to reduce student referrals to special education programs is evaluated in this study together with its impact on classroom teacher policy. The Classroom Alternative Process (CAP) addresses strategies for regular education teachers to remediate students' problems prior to, or instead of, referral to special education. Data were collected from longitudinal student data, case records, interviews with Classroom Alternative Support Team leaders and principals, participant questionnaires, and a longitudinal attitude survey of pilot schools. The findings indicate that the program contributed to an overall change in teachers' problem-solving practices as well as to a reduction in student referrals. Factors for program success are teacher specificity, adaptability, recognition of cognitive and organizational structures, and provision for actual change. (LMI)

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The Classroom Alternative Process:

School Change Policy into Practice

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The Classroom Alternative Process: School Change Policy into Practice

by Sharon Rallis

Introduction

Policy is generally adopted to address some specific set of actions or procedures; thus, when an agency establishes a new policy, some change in these operating procedures is expected. However, the actual impact of the policy or practice may be greater or less than, or simply different from, what the agency intended. This paper illustrates how a policy with a specific purpose can have broad and unexpected effects on practice. In this case, the procedure chosen to implement this policy became a school restructuring effort that changed the practices and beliefs of teachers who participated.

In 1985 the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education approved a set of recommended procedures to be implemented by the state's department of education. The policy behind the procedures was to reduce the number of students identified as learning disabled (LD) in the public elementary and secondary schools in the state. One of the recommendations included the establishment of building-based teams of regular classroom teachers to assist their colleagues in developing alternative instructional strategies for the students who experience learning problems in their classrooms. To implement this recommendation, the state project coordinator focused on training cadres of practicing

I want to recognize and thank all the personnel at the Rhode Island Department of Education who made the evaluation of CAP possible and who used the results. My special thanks to Anne DeFanti, CAP coordinator and trainer. My thanks also to Judith Beckman who helped me interview principals and teachers.

teachers in schools throughout the state. This paper reports the findings of the four-year evaluation study conducted on this project, the Classroom Alternative Process (CAP), and it examines the impact of the project and, indirectly, the policy on classroom teachers.

The number of students identified as learning disabled (LD) in schools has been escalating since the passage of PL 94-142. Nationally, from the 1976-77 school year to the 1986-87 school year, the number of children classified as learning disabled grew a startling 141.6% (797,213 children in 1976 and 1,916,097 children in 1987; (see Tenth Annual Report to Congress on The Implementation of the Education of the Handicapped Act). In the same ten years, the learning disabled population in Rhode Island grew by 358% (3,647 children in 1976 to 13,086 children in 1987). Rhode Island also records significantly higher than the national average percentage of learning disabled students in comparison to its total handicapped population. (For example, during the school year 1983-84, nearly 80% of all Rhode Island handicapped identification were for learning disabilities, whereas, slightly less than 50% of national identification of handicapped were for LD.) Thus, although the problem of escalating numbers of LD students is a national concern, Rhode Island appeared to have cause for extra concern.

In response to this concern, the Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, J. Troy Earhart, appointed in 1984 an Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Learning Disabilities, to study the issues of referral, assessment, and identification of learning disabled students. The Committee consisted of 35 professionals and parents knowledgeable in the area of learning disabilities and representatives of local school districts, professional and advocacy organizations, and institutions of higher education.

The Ad Hoc Committee completed its study and the Commissioner brought the committee's recommendations to the Rhode Island Board of Regents in June, 1985. These recommendations included the establishment of building-based teams of regular education teachers to assist colleagues in developing alternative strategies to special education referral. The Board of Regents approved the implementation of a set of recommended procedures to put the policy in place, and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) began the process of implementation during the 1985-86 school year.

The Classroom Alternative Process (CAP) addresses strategies for regular education teachers to remediate students' problems prior to or instead of referral to special education. Major arguments in support of the prereferral building-level support teams of the Classroom Alternative Process include the following:

- In many instances, the perceived problem can be remedied by providing support to the regular classroom teacher through direct consultation with colleagues or special education staff.
- Many students, e.g., slow learners who need additional support from time to time, who are not eligible for special education services as well as special needs students who have been mainstreamed, were "falling through the cracks."
- If individual student's problems can be resolved within the regular classroom setting, the school system will eliminate costly and inappropriate evaluation and placement of students.
- If the problem cannot be resolved in the regular classroom setting, the thorough collection of specific information about the student will enhance the multidisciplinary team evaluation.
- By using a well-documented, structured, prereferral process the education agency (LEA) will have ensured that all attempts were made to serve the child in the least restrictive environment.

The purpose, then, of the building-level support teams, known as the Classroom Alternative Support Teams (CAST), was to create a setting for collaborative, collegial problem-solving, to generate alternatives to special education as the first recourse, and to ensure that all students'

needs were being met in the least restrictive environment. The recommendation to establish the teams rested on the assumption that these collaborative cultures did not already exist in schools.

Because the establishment of the building-based teacher assistance teams required altering teachers' attitudes as well as practices, intensive teacher training was conducted throughout the state. Training involved three phases. During Phase I of training, which began in fall of 1985 and was completed in spring of 1989, at least one school in 33 of the 37 districts in the state was introduced to the collaborative consultation process and members were chosen to serve on the school's Classroom Alternative Support Teams (CAST). CAST members returned to their schools where they were to receive and act on referrals from their colleagues.. During Phase II, experienced CAST members were trained to train other teachers within their own systems. Teachers training teachers comprised Phase III. Teacher training served as the foundation for policy implementation.

Evaluation Methodology

The Center for Evaluation and Research of Rhode Island College (CERRIC) was contracted in the first stages of project implementation to provide evaluation services for CAP. In the 1985-86 school year, the goals of the evaluation were defined and plans were drawn to achieve these goals. We began to collect data in two pilot districts that had received training. We continued to collect data in these two districts during the second year, 1986-87. As the numbers of schools receiving training grew in the 1987-88 school year, data were collected from all trained schools. The final year, 1988-89, has seen the continued collection of data from all trained districts. At this time we also began to summarize the information and to draw conclusions.

The project personnel worked closely with the evaluator from the beginning. They identified two major purposes for the evaluation: to provide formative feedback to improve the program's operation; to document the program's impact on the schools, teachers, and children involved. To meet the first purpose, the evaluator met regularly with the project director and trainers to share the analyses of data as they were collected. Instruments were designed to assess the degree to which the process was being used, and the degree to which the process was perceived as useful. Instruments also provided information on problem areas, conditions for and barriers to success. While we did gather essential numbers, the evaluation was not driven by numbers. We recognized that, while the policy motivation for the implementation of the process was the high numbers of students in Rhode Island identified as learning disabled, it would be unrealistic to expect that the Classroom Alternative Process could in a few years turn the tide of more than a decade. First, the identification of a student is a complex process influenced by numerous factors, both within and outside schools; second, the state in no way intended to deny services to those students who actually needed them. Since the process was designed to make the identification more thorough and rigorous, one can assume that if the process is followed, those identified are truly in need of special education services.

Data were gathered through a variety of methods:

- Numbers and percentages of students identified as learning disabled were documented from 1985 through 1989 in order to assess longitudinal trends.

- The Case Status Record Keeper (a team documentation form) was collated regularly to document number and grade levels of cases referred, types of problems, length of meetings, and interventions selected.

- CAST chairpersons and principals were interviewed annually to assess level of team operation in buildings, degree of satisfaction with the process, and conditions and/or barriers to team success.

- Questionnaires were mailed periodically to referring teachers and CAST members to determine satisfaction with operation.

- An attitude survey was administered in the two pilot districts during the first months of the project in 1986 and at the end of 1989.

Analyses of all the data focused on the conditions under which the process was followed an on the changing attitudes within the schools.

Results

1. **While** we did caution against over-emphasis upon numbers, the statistical trend analysis beginning in 1978-79 shows that the rate of identification of LD students reached a plateau in 1984-85 and appears to be decreasing. That the rate slowed and changed during the years when the CAP was introduced suggests that this program has been influential in altering teachers' ways of solving classroom problems through special education referral.

2. **A review** of the team documentation form across time reveals the following points:

- Teachers are referring students with problems to the CASTs.

- Referring teachers give multiple reasons for referrals.

- Academic problems are, by far, the most common reason for referral. Behavioral problems often accompany an academic problem.

- Students' organization/study skills is the third most common reason for referral.

- Teams report that meetings usually last 15-30 minutes; follow-up meetings generally run 10-30 minutes.

- Sometimes teams met as many as three or four times to generate intervention for a child; teams often suggested multiple interventions at one meeting.

- Special education referral remained the most frequent overall intervention, but less than 50% of all CAST referrals resulted in special education referral.

- Instructional modifications were the second most often used intervention.

- In about 10% of the cases, the team specifically stated that the problem had been solved. The others (approximately 40%) were still being addressed by the team.

3. **Teams** were expected to use the basic group problem-solving process outlined in the training no matter where the location. However, schools are complex places, so the project was designed to allow teams to "make it their own," maintaining the core proces and spirit while adjusting as they felt necessary to be successful in different school climates with different circumstances. Through the interviewing process it was possible to elicit, in a personal way, the positive and negative challenges that met the teams in their individual school communities. Documenting these challenges and how they were handled by the teams was crucial to the assessment of a program aimed at creating change in schools.

The interview data enabled us to categorize four types of teams. These types are described below.

- **Functioning Teams/Thriving** report operating with a purpose, strength and belief in their capabilities and value. They have taken and willingly shared a strong leadership position in the school. All were created in schools where only positive professional relationships already existed and where the building principal genuinely cared about helping teachers and students. These teams have truly tailored this process to improve their own effectiveness. Modifications are often the result of a natural evolution toward what simply made most sense; for example, one CAST color codes its sheets according to which follow-up stage the referral is in.

These thriving teams also generate a lengthy list of instructional and behavioral interventions for referring teachers. In sum, these teams have come to be viewed as a vital asset to the faculty in these schools.

- **Functioning Teams/With Problems** express a willingness and desire to continue their CAST operations but the very small number of referrals they receive hinders their overall acceptance. These teams report no problems in generating interventions for the referrals they have received, but their successes did not necessarily result in further referrals. These teams have focused on "selling" the process in the buildings, but have had little opportunity to adapt the process to meet their building's needs. Time and scheduling appear to be potential problems for these groups. Principals in these schools appear to be supportive, but were unable to surmount the problems.

- **Non-Functioning Teams/Wanting to Function** include schools where members who have been trained in the Classroom Alternative Process remain positive about its potential but have been disappointed or discouraged by circumstances which prevent their functioning. Often the circumstances are external problems relating to the teachers contract and lack of compensation. In other instances, the teams suffered negative perceptions among the faculty and eventually put them out of business. This type of team stated that "CAST could work and could be a valuable asset to schools if more extensive training were required." Generally in these schools, one major condition, such as lack of referrals or inability to find meeting time, was enough to prevent functioning.

- **Non-Functioning Teams/Not Wanting to Function** are trained in the process but express no interest in establishing themselves in any way. Many chairpersons in schools in this category report that in their

buildings the problems the CAP was designed to handle either do not exist (i.e., due to superior teacher skill or high caliber of students) or are being handled successfully in another way.

In sum, interviews indicate the general shcool climate and prevailing faculty attitudes appear to have a major influence on the success or lack of success of a CAST. In schools where positive attitudes already prevailed, the CAP/CAST project is viewed as a very serious possibility for raising the level of professionalism still higher and creating a shift in school practice toward recognizing, affirming, and utilizing the collective expertise of the faculty even more. These faculties embraced the CAP/CAST process as another useful tool to be modified for their own purposes. It was never seen as a threat or an unwanted dictum. Participants, both referring teachers and team members, were not suspicious of it.

4. **Referring teachers** were surveyed to determine their attitudes toward the process. Overall satisfaction among responding referring teachers with the interaction between themselves and CAST members was extremely high. They particularly held the professionalism and capability of CAST members in very high regard. The group also reported growing satisfaction with the outcome of CAST meetings although their reported satisfaction with the usefulness of the team's proposed intervention does not appear to correlate with the overall level of satisfaction they reported having derived from participation in the CAST process. For example, the 1989 data shows that only about 56% of the responding referring teachers judged the intervention plans to be actually useful with the student.

5. **CAST members** were also surveyed to determine attitudes toward the process. Responding Team members indicate high opinions of their teams'

competence and effectiveness. They believed that their teams were sensitive to creating an atmosphere conducive to the referring teachers' comfort, and they reported confidence in their teams' abilities to produce useful academic and behavioral interventions. They also reported expecting the teams' presence in the school to enhance school climate. Finally, they report having derived a very high level of personal satisfaction from CAST membership. Respondents indicated that CAST was a particularly rewarding experience for providing stimulating opportunities to develop and use professional skills.

6. **Since** the Classroom Alternative Process was designed to affect teachers' attitudes and school climate, we administered a pre and post test survey to measure any changes in teachers' views about decision-making, problem-solving, and support systems in their school. In the district where CAP functioned, that is, where teams met, noticeable positive changes appeared in response to the following questions:

- While I obviously cannot have a vote on every decision that is made in this school, I feel that I have enough input into decisions that directly affect me.
- The level of support I have received from fellow teachers relative to students with learning problems has been...
- I use other teachers' ideas and suggestions in my classroom.
- I feel comfortable working with parents of students who have learning problems.

Since the first three of these items are directly related to project goals, we feel safe in attributing the positive changes to CAP. Since a common intervention recorded in the Case Status Record Keepers was parent involvement, we suspect that the reported increase in comfort working with parents is also due to the CAP.

In the surveyed district where no teams functioned over time, no noticeable increases or decreases in attitudes appeared between the pre- and post administrations.

7. **Since the project-specific goal of CAP** was to provide teachers with a process to solve problems (that is, to seek appropriate solutions within their own realm rather than to ask special education to handle their problems), we can say that CAP is working in those schools where a team meets and generates interventions.

- Thirty-four (34) of the 37 districts have been trained, and from the Case Status Record Keeper we see that CASTs were operating in at least 41 schools in the state by June 1989.

- All functioning teams have generated alternative interventions for student problems.

- Less than 50% of all CAST referrals are sent on the MDT evaluation; without the CAST, these problems would either all have been sent to MDT or the teacher would have been left without any support or alternative strategies in dealing with the problem.

- While most cases are sent on to MDT, the CAST still generated strategies to assist the teachers. In many of these cases, the team met several times and offered several interventions before the special education referral was made.

When reviewing the results, we see that several conditions are present in those schools where teams do function:

- The district administration is aware of and supports the program.

- The building principal cares about teachers helping teachers solve problems and facilitates the team's operation.

- The building has or develops an atmosphere of positive collegial relationships.

- Resources are available and/or people are willing to locate them (resources are defined to include time, money, materials).

- Programmatic options or alternatives, and general support services exist or can be created.

Not all conditions may exist to the same degree in all settings at the same time. In several cases, all conditions did not exist at the outset but developed in the schools as the teams operated.

Implications

While the Board of Regents adopted a policy to reduce referrals to special education, the procedure they implemented became in practice a school restructuring effort; the Classroom Alternative Process focused on training teachers and establishing a new structure or legitimizing an existing informal structure in schools. The training aimed to change teachers' ways of thinking and acting, and the structure provided a setting for teachers to use these new ways of thinking and acting. The teams provided opportunities for teachers to solve problems and make decisions collaboratively. Based on the conceptualization of teachers as professionals who work together to meet students' needs, the process is educationally sound. Informal teacher support and collaborative problem-solving teams have often operated in effective schools. The CAP is a legitimate effort to formalize and empower teachers using these behaviors. In some settings the process has worked; in others it has not.

Where it worked, the policy, whose origin was fairly narrow in scope, did bring about a much broader change in practice than simply to reduce referrals. Where teams functioned, implementation included both instrumental (affecting structure and activity) change and transformational change (affecting assumptions and beliefs, see Levy, 1986); in other words, the policy legitimized a set of beliefs about the way teachers should function in schools, and it provided a structure in which those beliefs could operate. The project worked in schools where teachers either had or developed a professional culture, that is, they believed or came to believe

in their abilities and responsibilities to solve classroom problems by themselves and collaboratively with colleagues, rather than to seek external help. In fact, teachers reported that the teams gave them needed opportunities to be professional. This "professional culture" (see Lieberman, 1988) was fostered both by *building* leadership, and by the opportunity to practice professional decision-making through the existence of the team.

Schools which did not have or were not able to develop this attitude of professionalism (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, 1988) were unable to make use of the team structure and activities; specifically, they could not find time to meet and/or could not find referrals. The absence of professional leadership and of a willingness to collaborate and to take responsibility for problem-solving presented an insurmountable barrier to the establishment or survival of teams. In these settings, policy did not affect practice.

In sum, conditions, team composition and operation, and interventions used are specific to each setting; yet in all functional settings, teachers are helping teachers to meet students' individual needs usually without special education services. This case illustrates how a specific policy fostered a broad and successful school reform initiative because the procedure used to implement the policy:

- was aimed directly at teachers' practice.
- accepted the uniqueness of each setting and encouraged the evolution of the process in each setting.
- addressed beliefs as well as structures.
- provided a real opportunity for teachers to change their practices for solving problems and for dealing with students' learning difficulties.

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